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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to help educators prepare non-native speakers of English for work in business by studying the overall effectiveness of English for specific purposes programs at the University of Michigan Business School. It describes the English for Business Studies (EBS) program established in 1986. Situated discourse research in a focus group of MBA students was conducted. Business school staff and faculty were interviewed, classes and student presentations and interactions were observed, and course syllabi were analyzed. The interviews and observations revealed that what was required for successful performance in the business school was not explicitly stated in the syllabi. Syllabi are sources of information about readings, assignments, and grading expectations, but most of the skills required (class participation; presentation, writing, and collaboration skills; and diversity and cultural awareness) were not stated explicitly--which put international students at a disadvantage. Because most requirements are incumbent on all students, regardless of nationality, it was a major task to sort out only those requirements incumbent on international students, because of their gaps in language and cultural knowledge. These skill were the focus of the EBS program. (Contains 11 references.) (KFT)

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Customer-Oriented Program Design for Business Students

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Executive Summary

For more than ten years, the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan has sponsored an intensive summer English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program for pre-MBA students. Although the program had always received high ratings, the program directors were becoming increasingly aware of the need for some changes. As a result, a formative evaluation of the English for Business Studies (EBS) program was undertaken in the spring of 1999.

In addition to comments from the post-course student evaluations, other data included:

- a follow-up seven months later with students who had been in the course during the previous summer
- business school faculty and staff perceptions of the performance of international students
- analysis of course content to determine if there was a match between what we were offering and the skills required of MBA students

The wide variety of data collected provided a rich picture of the value and efficacy of the EBS program and helped point the way to changes that could be made to improve the program over the next few years. Several unexpected by-products from the study included increased visibility in the business school and partnering on joint projects with individual members of the business school.

Some of the recommended changes were incorporated into the summer 1999 program. Teamwork was fully integrated into the program and a special time was allotted for teams to meet. The only problem that arose was striking a balance between working with the same team throughout the session (as is done in the business school), or changing teams so as to be able to work with a variety of people. Following upon one of the recommendations, a general evaluation covering all the courses was administered. Again, the evaluations were all generally positive. Students particularly expressed satisfaction with the teamwork elements of the program. Their most common request, across all courses, was for additional individual feedback from the teachers.

Introduction

English for Business Studies Program Enrollment

The English for Business Studies (EBS) program was established in 1986 at the suggestion of John Swales, the newly appointed director of the English Language Institute (ELI). The 18-hour-a-week program consisted of courses in Organizational Behavior (now called Business Topics), Case Studies, Listening, Business Writing, and Pronunciation (now called Fluency)—a structure that has endured virtually unchanged to this day.

Very few of those enrolled most recently were required to take the course, primarily because the cut-off for enrollment in the business school is a TOEFL score of 600. The fact that so many students were enrolling voluntarily, however, was quite surprising, and a clear indication that the students themselves felt their English language skills to be inadequate.

University of Michigan Business School

The University of Michigan Business School (UMBS) offers degrees at all levels (BBA, MBA, Ph.D.), though the MBA program is clearly the most important. Core courses required of first-year MBA students fall into roughly three categories: finance, management and tools (e.g., statistics).

While this program may not seem very different from that offered in most MBA programs, the overall program has, in fact, undergone significant changes over the past ten years.

Leadership Development Program (LDP) – a five-day workshop in which participants determine managerial strengths and weaknesses using assessment tools, formulate an action plan for self development, and produce outstanding results by working effectively in teams.

Executive Skills Program – half-day non-credit workshops that provide students the skill set needed by business leaders (e.g., teamwork, time management, interpersonal communication, networking).

The Multi-Disciplinary Action Project (MAP) – a full-time, team-based program for first year MBAs (second half of Winter term) in which students put into practice the knowledge acquired from their core courses. Students partner with firms on solving real-world problems, making recommendations for process improvement.

This last development—MAP—is central to the first-year program. As a practical application of all they have learned to date, the program puts a tremendous amount of pressure on the students. The challenge is even greater for international students who have to contend with language and cultural differences as well.

These curricular reforms have probably contributed a great deal to the U-M Business School's recent high ratings for its MBA program: 4th in the nation by Business Week and 7th by U.S. News and World Report (1997); 2nd by the 1999 Business Week survey.

Methodology

The goal of the study was to collect evaluative data on the EBS program that went beyond post-course student evaluations of satisfaction. To obtain measures of participant satisfaction and learning seven months following the program, a focus group was conducted. To determine what MBA students need to know to be successful performers, situated discourse research (Jacoby 1998) was conducted: business school faculty and staff were interviewed; classes, MAP presentations, and student interactions were observed; and course syllabi were analyzed. The interviews and observations revealed that a great deal of that required for successful performance in the business school was not explicitly stated in the syllabi. Furthermore, most requirements (whether explicit or not) are incumbent on all business students, regardless of background. A major task, therefore, was to separate out those skills that are incumbent only on international students because of their gaps in language and cultural knowledge. These skills would then be the likely focus of courses in the EBS program. And finally, to determine the efficacy of the EBS vis-à-vis the MBA program, EBS faculty were interviewed.

Findings

The course syllabi provided the usual explicit information about readings, assignments, and grading expectations. Of more interest, however, was discovering the skills that all students need but that are not stated explicitly.

Implicit Skill Requirements for MBA Students

The implicit skill requirements were primarily deduced from class observations and from interviews with faculty, staff, and students. They are categorized into five major areas:

- Class Participation
- Presentation Skills
- Writing Skills
- Collaboration Skills
- Diversity and Cultural Awareness

Class Participation

Participation in every class is essential, with participation in case discussions often accounting for 30% of a student's grade. Even though sections are composed of 70 students each, students are expected to contribute in class. Participation must be active; quality is more important than quantity. One professor speaks of the 4 Ps:

- Preparation: Everyone must analyze every case.
- Presence: Attendance is necessary but not sufficient.
- Participation: Consistent, high-quality participation is expected.
- Pertinence: Participation must be consistent and insightful.

The challenge to participate is not trivial. Students need to be able to hear from all directions, lots of different accents, in large lecture halls; they must understand what they've heard; they must think quickly, pulling together a variety of different comments; and then formulate what to say and get recognized by the instructor. While instructors reserve the right to cold call, asking for specific comments or answers to questions, they usually rely on volunteers. That makes the task even more challenging—and perhaps no less fear provoking.

Ability to participate in class varies widely, and is based not just on language factors but also on personality. Many instructors recognize the difficulty and are eager to help students. Probably the most common technique is to provide students with study questions that accompany the readings. Students who prepare the questions in advance are then well prepared, at least from the point of view of content, to respond to questions.

A former EBS student suggested that the EBS could show students how to be more active participants by forming study groups before the case studies were discussed in class. The students could meet as small groups, without a leader, listening, taking notes, and then coming to class prepared to discuss the case.

Students also need to participate when responding to others' presentations. They need to know how to state their question in a way the presenter understands and to challenge the presenter without attacking.

Interestingly, internationals themselves often had difficulty understanding the pronunciation of other internationals—including the accent of some of the instructors in the MBA program—and suggested that the EBS show short taped segments of these professors multiple times so they could get used to the accent prior to the beginning of classes.

Presentation Skills

If speaking up to participate in a class of 70 peers is challenging, making a presentation is probably even more challenging. Because very little explicit information is provided in course syllabi about how to present, students must develop the skills on their own. Fortunately, presentations are such an integral part of some of the courses (particularly MAP), that students are at least exposed to the presentation styles of a wide variety of people and can thus see for themselves what makes a good (or not so good) presentation.

Before doing their final presentation, team members must also do a presentation on their project plan. Outside consultants provide training sessions on how to build effective teams (Mills and Merchant 1999) to help ensure that all members' contributions are heard, that all members participate equitably in presenting, and that those less effective at making oral presentations are not relegated to just doing graphics. Part of the training also encourages team members to make the most of their diversity: working through differences early on results in stronger contributions in the long run.

Students seem to put a great deal of effort into their presentations. The material is well organized with appropriate slide presentations and handouts. Difficulties seem to lie mainly in delivery and the format of some slides (e.g., unreadable flow charts and use of complete sentences). Those who were able to insert humor into their presentations seemed to be the more confident, usually native-speaking, students. Surprisingly, the accents of the international students only seemed to interfere with their intelligibility when a word was improperly stressed. One of the program directors agreed that improper pronunciation is not a major impediment.

Writing Skills

The requirements stated explicitly in the course syllabi deal primarily with the technicalities of writing (e.g., number of pages, format, brief outline of expected contents) rather than with how to write per se. Students are expected to develop audiovisual support (usually a slide presentation), but the assumption is that they will acquire this information on their own or through training sessions from the computer lab.

Three genres predominate the syllabi and appear in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Genre Descriptions Extrapolated from the UMBS Syllabi

Case Studies (prose bullet outline)	Identify problem/opportunity/theme/issue Identify potential solutions Analyze and evaluate alternatives Make final recommendation
Projects (usually group: research paper, proposal, report)	Executive summary Introduction and background information Current process/situation and problem definition Analyses and recommendations Appendices Bibliography
Reaction Papers (personal reactions, learning logs)	Self-reflection Examples from own experience: understanding of consequences of values, attitudes, style, behavior, etc. on self, others, organization How you think about what you did Conceptual understanding Application (plans for action)

Another implicit written requirement involves communication to transact the business of being an MBA student. A basic assumption is that e-mail is *the* mode of communication and that everyone knows how to use it properly. While most students entering the MBA program probably had prior experience with e-mail, many of them needed some orientation.

One other implicit writing skill is whatever is needed to procure an internship or job. The Office of Career Development (OCD) provides a great deal of assistance in resume preparation and the development of interview skills through lectures and their Skill Builder Series of 15-page instructional pamphlets.

Collaboration Skills

Another set of implicit skills is collaboration and group work. Almost all cases analysis is done, at some point, in groups. While MAP provides training in building effective teams and communication courses have segments on collaborative communication, the training comes only at the end of the first year—if at all. But even prior to that, students must know how to work efficiently in a group, how to come to a consensus, and, most importantly, how to write collaboratively.

Diversity and Cultural Awareness

A major concern for businesses today is how well they manage diversity. In terms of its cultural diversity, the University of Michigan Business School is certainly at the forefront of most MBA programs, with an international population of over 25%. Managing the cultural diversity within the MBA classes, however, is another matter.

Most faculty members are aware how much the international students can contribute to the quality of the program and, for this reason, insist on quality class participation from everyone. They are eager to incorporate this expertise into their classes. Some faculty members, however, may not be as sensitive to the difficulties international students face in speaking up in a language in which they may not be completely fluent.

In an article that appeared in the student weekly, *The Monroe Street Journal*, Etchegoin and Quevedo (1999: 12) questioned whether the business school was really taking advantage of its international diversity (27% of the class of 2000 representing 35 countries). While recognizing that diversity is positive and necessary, they acknowledge that certain factors may be preventing its full realization. They suggest that while students must realize that their ideas are valuable and that they must speak up, faculty too must increase involvement, perhaps by using more non-U.S. cases and by encouraging exchange among students.

Bridging the Gap for Nonnative Speakers of English

The above implicit requirements apply to all MBA students. There are, however, additional implicit requirements that are virtually not dealt with in the business school because everyone is presumed to have these skills. Examples include how to communicate effectively in English in a variety of contexts (formal and informal), how to know which mode of communication is appropriate for a specific situation, how to join in conversations or discussions, and how to prepare written material to conform to generally accepted academic standards. For many international students, however, these skills cannot be taken for granted and should be made a focus of instruction.

- Socialization/Acculturation
- English Language Skills
- English for Specific Purposes: English for Business Skills

Socialization/Acculturation

While many internationals in the program may have previously traveled, lived, or worked in the U.S. or another English-speaking country, for some, this is their first trip abroad. According to former EBS participants, one of the major benefits of the program is that it gets them here before the start of the school year so they can get acclimated to the culture, get settled, and even pick up the slang. They also mentioned how important the program was in giving them an instant set of friends. Even though they rarely got to see their classmates once classes began, they at least felt connected when they would meet one another again.

One of the EBS instructors, a doctoral candidate in the business school, suggested that the best way for students to become socialized into the B-School culture would be to hold the EBS classes there. He also thought the students might benefit from listening to an introductory lecture from each of the core courses. Business Topics skits, normally performed the last day of class, also provide a fun way to learn about corporate culture.

English Language Skills

Feedback from students and instructors provided information about the specific courses offered in the EBS program. The findings are discussed in terms of the typical language skill areas—Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing.

In general, students were quite satisfied with their EBS experience and appreciative of whatever had been covered. In most instances, the suggestions made were not *against* what was done but *for* additional training to help them in specific areas (the major one being *small talk*: see Speaking below.)

Listening

Students found most listening activities helpful. Feedback from students at the end of their first year in the MBA program noted that listening was a very important skill that needed to be developed more. Specific suggestions were to:

- Spend more time on listening during the first two weeks of the summer session to get their ears tuned (to speed of talk, to accents, to buzz words).
- Practice notetaking skills more, especially the abbreviations.
- Listen to radio programs (e.g., NPR) and watch TV shows (e.g., situation comedies). For TV shows, listen repeatedly without watching until comprehended.

Speaking

For the most part, students found the pronunciation lessons helpful (especially when they were divided into language groups); those who found them less helpful did not feel that pronunciation was one of the areas they needed to work on.

One of the students' major requests was for more help in informal conversation. Once they had left the confines of the English as a second language classroom, where they managed rather well to communicate with their fellow international students, they were often at a loss how to communicate with Americans, particularly in informal, unstructured settings.

Contributing to conversations is difficult for them because they lack background in common cultural information such as sports and politics. This lack of ability to carry on small talk affects all of their relationships, from relationships with other students to relationships they are trying to establish with clients during MAP or with the person interviewing them for a job.

Some suggestions offered to help them develop these conversational skills included:

- Spending more time speaking (e.g., on a daily topic) and expressing themselves and less time on academic material
- Having native English-speaking MBA students participate in the EBS program
- Regularly reading the newspaper (especially sports) so they have something to talk about.
- Watching the hottest TV programs.

Reading

One student noted that the extensive reading in the Business Topics class was good preparation. In light of all the reading they need to do in the B-School, instruction in speed-reading skills, and time to practice them, would be useful. He noted that OCD has a course available in speed-reading. Another suggestion was for EBS instructors to explain what it means to skim and to give students an idea how long it should take to read a particular assignment.

Writing

In general, students suggested writing more, shorter pieces rather than one longer piece, and to do so individually rather than in a group. On the other hand, one student thought there should be more group writing, not so much for the writing itself but for having to collaborate and come to a consensus on ideas. Students also requested help writing documents that are more characteristic of business contexts (e.g., memos, letters, resumes).

ESP: English for Business Skills

Inasmuch as the EBS program is English for specific purposes (ESP), the findings are discussed in terms of the tasks students are required to accomplish. The B-School courses seem to be organized around three types of activities: lectures with discussion, case study analysis, and MAP.

Business Topics

In the EBS program, lectures were presented in the Business Topics course. The students were quite happy with this course. They suggested, however, that the focus be more on the acquisition of skills (e.g., speaking) rather than on the business content per se, that students get to participate more, and perhaps that more videos be shown.

Case Studies

Case study analysis is central to the UMBS program and is one of the components of the EBS as well. The students were very happy with this aspect of the program, realizing how well it prepared them for their studies in the B-School. Overall, students requested fewer cases, shorter topics, and more discussion. One recommendation was to use some of the cases from the B-School so that the students would be better prepared when beginning their studies. By having already dealt with these cases, they would be better able to volunteer to speak up in class. Early, quality participation would set the stage for favorable consideration by the instructor and the other students.

Students also made recommendations for improving their performance in case study discussion. They suggested using teams as study groups, with the teams remaining together throughout the program. By receiving study guide questions before discussion of the case in class, the teams could reach a consensus in the group on their analysis as Americans do. Having to come to a consensus contrasts sharply with the situation in normal ESL classes where the teachers provide everything the students need, students express their ideas in turn, and everyone listens to everyone else without arguing. In the end, students could write up the case analysis individually for a grade.

MAP

In the Multi-Disciplinary Action Project (MAP), students get to put into practice all they have learned to date far in the MBA program. Through effective teamwork, they must write a final report and give a final presentation. Along the way they must be able to relate with clients, work effectively in a team, and provide interim oral and written progress reports both to the client and to the MAP program. When faced with these major tasks, students realized they could have used some preparation from the EBS program.

At the very beginning of the project, they must interview clients—often on the phone. The lack of visual clues in telephone conversations makes the task even harder for the nonnative speaker. Problems often arose with interpretation of the results—a contrast between what they said and what they meant. Students realized they had to make sure they understood what the client had been talking about. They therefore needed skills in formulating in advance questions that would get them the information they needed (e.g., developing scripts) and skills in confirming what they understood (e.g., "then what you're saying is ...").

The principal written tasks they must accomplish are a planning document outlining the scope of the project and the work process, progress reports, and a final report. They must also make oral presentations using appropriate audiovisual support. Students would have liked doing shorter, more frequent presentations in the EBS program, with each group presenting on a different topic.

Discussion

Taking a more global view of the findings, three principal areas seem to have emerged:

- The Business school faculty and staff are eager to partner with us and realize the relationship will be beneficial to them as well as to us.
- EBS students seem to feel their major difficulty is carrying on conversations in informal situations (i.e., small talk).
- The EBS instructors recognize that the best way to improve the program is to coordinate the different courses, emphasizing skill development while using a core set of business materials.

Partnering with the Business School

Conducting this study and meeting with people in the business school was a first step in letting people in the business school know what goes on at the English Language Institute, particularly in the English for Business Studies program during the summer. It is no surprise that the business school has a wealth of information and expertise that we can benefit from.

Staff

The staff who participated in this project worked primarily in the Office of Admissions and Career Development.

Office of Admissions

The business school is interested in making sure that all students who might face difficulties in the business school receive services that can help prepare them for the tasks ahead. Admissions is interested in knowing the minimum TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score with which students can function adequately and the TOEFL score beyond which international students should have no need for English language intervention.

To answer these questions, two informal inquiries were made. First, the names of international students identified as experiencing difficulties in the MBA program (particularly in the MAP program) were forwarded to Admissions. While some of those on the list had participated in the summer EBS program, most had not. Overall, the average TOEFL score of students on the list was 630.

The second inquiry made was of the ELI faculty to determine whether students with TOEFL scores of 600 can succeed in the business school. There seemed to be little correlation between TOEFL score and performance in the EBS program. At this point, no compelling evidence exists to raise the cutoff for entering MBA students. What is important, however, is that the program be recommended for students with scores below 620 (and perhaps below 630).

Office of Career Development

The Office of Career Development (OCD) helps prepare business students for the world beyond UMBS. They assist with internships and job searches. They provide seminars on all aspects of the search process such as resume preparation, cover letter writing, and interviewing skills.

Faculty

Faculty members who responded to the request for participation were very interested in the project and eager to help in whatever way they could. The information provided during the interviews and the impressions received from the class observations were extremely helpful in providing input to the study.

Resources

Partnering with the business school also provides a laboratory for linguistic analysis. For example, an instructor who asked several closed-ended, Yes-No questions was very successful at eliciting elaborate responses—probably because they were opinion questions that allowed students to answer based on their own backgrounds. Sample questions included: Is this uniquely Asian? Is ethnic dining a good idea? Does pay motivate people?

Conversations with Native Speakers

The difficulty EBS students have interacting with native speakers in unstructured, informal contexts is enormous. While the EBS provides a significant contribution in getting them acculturated upon their arrival, it is also a shelter that may overly protect them. Former EBS students repeatedly asked for opportunities to interact with native speakers.

Coordination of Instruction

Almost all EBS instructors suggested that the course content and materials be coordinated. While the Business Topics and Case Studies course have extensive materials, the Fluency and Business Communications course had relatively little. Since students expressed a desire for more work on skills and less focus on business content, some of the material from Business Topics and Case Studies can be used for developing oral and written skills.

Recommendations

Recommendations were made at three levels: the English for Business Studies program itself, relationships with the business school, and the community of English language teaching professionals.

English for Business Studies (EBS) Program

Teamwork and Coordination

Since so much of the MBA work done in teams, EBS students should also work in teams. Working with the same teammates throughout the session, students would not be faced with scheduling problems having to meet with a different team for each of their courses.

One of the primary goals of the business school is to link material throughout the program. Therefore, coordinating the content and materials across the different courses in the EBS program is a must. Students do not need to read a multitude of different cases for each of our individual courses. The number of cases that must be read can be limited by having students discuss, present, and write on the same case. Redesigning the program at some point to be project-based rather than skills-based makes a great deal of sense.

Individual Courses

Business Topics

The major recommendation here is to incorporate more skills-based activities (for example, reading) and especially to increase discussion time.

Case Studies

The number of cases studied might be reduced. Newer cases might be introduced based on recommendations from the B-School faculty. The analysis of some case studies might be coordinated with the writing and presentation skills classes.

Business Communication

The focus needs to be on shorter, more frequent writing. The genres most appropriate for first-year MBA students are case study analysis, reaction papers, reports, memos/letters, and resumes. The case studies and reports will also need to be coordinated with the presentation skills course. Additional items to be included are style guidelines for documentation, some instruction in punctuation and mechanics, and a broad range of advanced grammar exercises.

Listening

Removing some of the videos and the transcribed speech activities might be considered. Adding taped lectures by nonnative-speaking professors (a request made by the students) would be helpful.

Speaking and Oral Presentation Skills (a/k/a Fluency)

The focus, and title, of this course should probably be changed to Speaking and Oral Presentation Skills. Pronunciation should be included, but those who do not need it should be able to opt out. How to design a PowerPoint presentation needs to be covered, along with how to effectively deliver the presentation. Coordination with the Business Communications course would work well since students often need to submit in writing what they've presented orally.

Program Evaluation

To continue this formative evaluation, a comprehensive evaluation should be designed for the entire program, with instructors asking only those questions that pertain to their specific courses. To maintain a high-quality program, ongoing formative evaluations should be conducted. Annual evaluations based on EBS student and faculty feedback should be sufficient, with more elaborate evaluations conducted every five years or whenever a major change occurs in the business school curriculum.

EBS Program Adjustments

EBS instructors were well aware of ways to improve the program. Their principal comment—on the need for more integration of content and materials across courses—meshes quite nicely with suggestions made by MBA students and faculty. A suggestion was also made to redesign the program so that instead of focusing on skills, we focus on major projects or tasks that the students need to complete.

During the summer following this study, some of the recommendations for change were made. As always, course evaluations were generally positive. The recurring request was for *more* of certain items: more discussion time, more focus on pronunciation [a backlash from the request for less focus on pronunciation the previous year]. The comment that appeared on the evaluation for almost every single course was for *more individual feedback* from the teachers.

Relationships with the Business School

Many valuable relationships were forged with people in the Business school as a result of this study. It was encouraging how interested everyone was in the work we are doing. Maintaining regular contact with the Office of Admissions and Career Development is crucial. This study should not be a one-time event.

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